Christine Meisner

Recovery of an Image: A Video Tale

This narration is the transcription of the video *Recovery of an Image*, a twenty-six minute film about the life of João Esan da Rocha, who was captured in 1840. He was brought from Nigeria to Brazil as a ten-year-old child and returned as a "free" man to Lagos after thirty-one years of domestic slavery on a sugar plantation in Bahia. Research for the video led to the descendants of Esan – his Yoruba name – in Lagos and Salvador. After talking to them it was possible to trace the different stages of his journey and mind by imagining the shifts in his remembrance and identity. But in the end this story became a fiction – a reinvention of his life, just as memory is always a new tale.

The video is part of Meisner's long-term art project about the transatlantic slave trade calles *what became*. It was combined with a series of drawings entitled *Quilombolisation* in Brazil and with a compilation of notes and sketches. The video, notes and drawings were first exhibited at the *fim de romance* display in the Musée des Beaux-Arts de Nantes, the Pinacoteca São Paulo, and the Museu de Arte Moderna in Recife in 2005 and, more recently in 2007, in the *Uncomfortable Truths* exhibition at the Victoria and Albert Museum London.

The video's narrator is Michael Ojake, born in Lagos. He studied in the United States and lives in Berlin as a professional actor or voice artist. Ojake speaks Lagos English, and the text reproduced below is precisely copied from his narration.

When Amaize was talking about the original of this house, which supposedly stands in Salvador de Bahia, I tried to remember the story of Kakawa Street, or rather, my mind was haunted by the remembrance of another person that did not really belong to me. That all this would become a part of my history at first seemed strange to me. Then I began to believe what I invented, and for a time, I took on the memory of another...

For seven days and seven nights, I rode on a donkey from Ilesha to Lagos. My parents wanted to send me to a school there run by missionaries. I was ten years old. At night, I was stolen out of my uncle's house by the Ijebus. How they got in, I don't know. They took me far away from the city to a village on the lagoon. I was put in hand and foot cuffs, which they had in all sizes. There were already many men, women and children there when we arrived. We traveled by canoe to

The *Campos* or the square in Lagos
where the Brazilians used to celebrate their festivals

Photo: Christine Meisner.

an island that we all had to cross together. Two large ships were just off shore. We were taken on board, and the men in chains were fastened together. There were several hundred people. The ship then left the coast, and the women were forced to dance naked as the sailors watched. I witnessed one sailor take a small girl and disappear with her, but no one else noticed. The others were concentrated on the women. Then the men and children had to go below deck and we were chained to metal frames. On deck, the women were screaming. Suddenly, it was silent and the women returned to the hold. They said a girl was dead and was thrown overboard, and the sailor was whipped by the captain. A woman attempted to take her own life and was placed in chains.

When I arrived on board, I couldn't imagine what was supposed to happen and why. They handled us like goods that had to be stuffed into the narrow, airless space inside the ship. They developed an attitude to make themselves immune against their actions by defining us as cargo rather than passengers. There was something clandestine about what they were doing. They took us here all the way from Lagos to do something that was forbidden in the city. I lost my dignity in a secret that everybody knew. The air in the hold was sickening. Short breathes, just enough to survive. I was scared of breathing in too much air while sleeping. Yet sleeping was the only thing that helped me overcome the uncertainty of the next moments. I knew nothing about the next day, not even if I would make it that far without going crazy.

The captain was afraid of patrol ships, which is why we had to stay mostly below deck. Once the men received pipes and tobacco and we were allowed to move and had to dance on deck. After a few weeks, they began to shave and wash us and rub palm oil on us. Then they freed us from the chains. Many had died since the start of the journey and had been thrown overboard. We were given blue fabric for loincloths. We reached another coast. Just before approaching the harbour, we were washed and rubbed with palm oil again. An agent came on board to have a look at us, and then we went on land, chained together. It looked like where I had come from, but no one told us where we were. We had to walk to a large market located very close to the harbour. There was a large house filled with human beings for sale, and at first, we were kept in the cellar. After a few days, I was sold to a man named Da Rocha. He was the one who changed my name and baptized me. I became Catholic. I never forgot my name: Esan.

We became the hands of the New World idea. Somewhere, there was a plan that we had no part in creating. We were there simply to fulfil what had already been established. The change of my name and what I believed in should have brought me closer to their kind, but in reality, they didn't really want that. Who was I, I wondered, when would I become this name? I simply did what came to me.

It all became so routine that there was no room for possibilities. I always took everything with me; I had nothing anywhere. I was occupied only in doing what they had planned for me. I was in Brazil and worked as an *escravo doméstico* on a sugar cane plantation in Can-

deias. I was an *aristocracia escrava*, a privileged worker. From a very young age, I had to help the baron in the mansion. He actually treated me well; he only beat me sometimes, though I never knew why. The other slaves were treated more brutally. I worked closely together with the baron in his office; eventually I had to do quite a bit for him. Somehow he trusted me. I learned things from him: to speak Portuguese, to read, to write, and how to do business. The windows were open wide most of the time to catch the cool of the breeze. You could see the slave barracks from the mansion, and there was a wide view over the bay. The plantation was surrounded by jungle; plants ran riot everywhere. The baroness had a garden with roses. When there was no sugar being produced in the evening and on Sundays, everything was quite still. There were no sounds other than the soft crash of the waves and the birds, numberless different kinds of them, singing in the trees by the house.

The air carried the smell from the nearby sugar mill into the mansion. In my memory, this smell probably meant something quite different to me than it did to the baron. Both of our existences here in this country were founded in such different and absurd ways. Time was my only luxury. I ran in circles without exit. I was nonexistent in time; I had no part in the calculation of time. I simply did not appear in the writing of history. Things never would be as I wanted them. Finally, I gave up imagining what I would like to have. Sundays, after attending the service in the chapel next to the mansion, I went to the bay and swore to myself never to get on a distant point of view where I would be resigned watching the ships disappear into the horizon. I was afraid that I would accept the whole situation, that I would see my position as fixed. I never wanted to give up imagining myself on all these ships. I always wanted to go back, but to somewhere else.

People in the city said that in Africa, you had the chance of a better life. You could be independent, your own boss. The English had abolished slavery, and you could live as a free person in Lagos. Here we had learned many things: how to make fine crafts and to trade. We were the most dependable workers, responsible, and trustworthy people.

I often had to go to the city for the baron. I always made a visit to the “Sociedade” next to the San Francisco church to speak with the head of the brotherhood about buying my freedom. The baron knew I

was a member there. By the time I was 30, enough money had been collected in the casket at the "Sociedade" for another raffle. All the pieces of paper with names of the other candidates were tossed on the big table. The director pulled one piece of paper from the pile, the piece with "João Esan da Rocha" on it. That's how I was called. They opened the three locks on the casket with the three keys and bought me from my master. At this time, I didn't know what I really was. An African trained to be Portuguese but now Brazilian? I had distanced myself from me and spoke of myself in the third person. I wanted to go back to what I was at the beginning. In the beginning, I was a child able to be taught anything. Africa promised me the chance to be something else. In Brazil, I was forever separated from the status of others by the mark of slavery.

After being purchased from my master, I lived with my wife, Louisa Angelica, in the Rua da Forca until our departure. My son Candido was born here. There was another woman I had children with. She stayed in Salvador. The journey to Africa was risky. Often passengers were not taken to their desired destinations. Sometimes people were immediately seized and sold again or were taken against their will to another destination. It was better to take an English ship; it was safer. The Portuguese ships reduced you back to slavery again. The captain spat on the wooden deck. Hopefully it was clear to him where I wanted to go ...

The last sentence that she placed into my memory when I left her behind in Bahia ... On the way to Brazil, I lost my orientation. On the way to Lagos, I lost my ability to forget. I had always hoped to one day wake up and be at my destination. Half my life I had spent adjusting to an existence in Brazil – had spent time there, absorbed much and made the most out of it without losing all self-respect. Every day something of myself went into this country without ever coming back to me. But I wasn't afraid anymore. What would be would be; what happened, happened. I was tired, but still I wanted to continue. The long journey home finally gave me time.

More than 1,000 returnees lived in Lagos. You could immediately recognize the newcomers by their dress. Angelica, too, wore a white dress from Bahia. After 31 years, we went back. No one knew anything about my family in Lagos; perhaps they had all died. We returnees from Brazil were assigned to receive a quarter in the city center

from Governor Glover, so I moved into the area around Campos Square. You could still see slave traders on the streets with their mulatto children from their former servants and slave ship captains. There was a curious mixture of Catholic belief, but no one was bothered by it. We quickly gained an advantage with the skills we brought with us to Lagos from Brazil. Our community stood between the Africans and the English. The indigenous people of Lagos were jealous of our accomplishments, but despite their mistrust, they let us be.

I returned to the country that had sold me. I never stopped suspecting that my parents were the ones who sold me. I didn't really want to find them. During the first four months I felt a sense of joy about my return, but the novelty quickly faded and I began to think back to Salvador. The past always appeared to me, more and more often, until in the end, all that was left was an essence of a memory, and I began to believe in this lie. My return was no mistake, but I created a new identity that was more at home in the remembered place Bahia than in Lagos, where I really lived. This is about promises, not changes.

I built the Waterhouse in Kakawa Street in the Brazilian style. Inside was a fountain that gave our house its name. It was the first fountain inside Lagos' city center and people came from all over to buy its water. Even the Oba drank from it. When you went inside the house, the birds greeted you by chirping and singing. The red parrot on its ebony stand always called my name. We had aviaries as large as rooms in the garden with crown birds, turkeys, guinea fowls, pigeons, and partridges. We had every kind of animal – cats that I fed with expensive fish boned myself. We had tortoises, and plants, and flowers. I grew roses. If they weren't careful around them I scolded my grandchildren in Portuguese. When I was upset, I always spoke Portuguese, even when the British stopped using translators by doing business with us.

Africa was a word. A promise. I knew that I could live a life like the one I had seen in Brazil but would never have been able to realize. In Brazil, I only had a past that added nothing more to what I always was there. Here, I had no past and was free to invent my own future. We were considered to be a new kind of white, with color and without classification. I am Brazilianized, Bahianized. In Brazil, I cultivated my African individuality, but upon my return to Lagos, I affirmed my

attachment to the manners and customs of Bahia. It was better to come to Lagos ... Is it important to link the people with their history?

I traded textiles, all sorts of trinkets and groceries. Later I dealt in gold. I sold to Brazil and Europe as well. I had our clothes made in Britain. We set ourselves up well in Lagos. We didn't want any mixing; my children had to marry within the Brazilian community. Discipline, honesty, and obedience – those were our values that I wanted to pass on to them. "Never lie, always tell the truth, and don't lose character. Be confident and generous, upstanding and loyal – the blood is straight." Back then, when a child was difficult, you gave him to the Brazilians. There was a lot of pride in the Brazilian community. Even though the people who had sold us into slavery thought they did something bad, they actually did something good. We were not the same anymore after slavery. After our experience in Brazil, we couldn't simply go back to Africa where we came from. This quickly became clear to us in Lagos. We had developed differently than those who had stayed here. We began to see advantages in this. We defined ourselves as a new class, even as a new kind of ethnic group.

I had a restaurant called "Bonanza" in Custom Street. I had breakfast there every Saturday and made sure everything was in order. Next to the large window on the street, there was a table that was always reserved for me. I had a clear view of the street from there. I smoked an El Arte cigar and drank a glass of Dry Monopol Ayala. Afterwards I went to the horse races, where I had horses running for me named "Tempest" and "Vampa". I watched them win every week.

I was in heaven as I sat in the Holy Cross Cathedral in Catholic Mission Street. Suddenly, it became dark outside, and a violent rainstorm poured down upon the church. The rain was so loud that the speech of the provost faded into the background. I didn't understand him when he thanked me for the donation I gave to the church to build the three chapels. I often helped this church so that it could become big and beautiful and allow Catholicism to find a home in Lagos ... like a church in Bahia. I forbade my children from kneeling before the Elders. I said to them, "You shall only kneel before God". The first Saturday in March was reserved for thanking God for the safe return of those who had left slavery and returned home. This day was known as "Nossa Senhora de Bom Fim". The da Rochas always went to this festival. All the Brazilians came together to attend a church service

and then we went through the center of town to go to Agege in the countryside and have a picnic. We had Brazilian dishes like *leite de coco, feijoada, mocaca de peixe*... It was a huge party where we also enjoyed dancing samba. We celebrated it every year.

I never wanted to be treated like a “Negro”. With time, we formed a kind of bourgeoisie, which with its dignity and its refinement, belonged to another time. We had become conservative in this way.